



**PRESS RELEASE**

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VANCOUVER, WA—Western Federal Lands Highway Division (WFLHD) of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has announced that the Thompson River Road improvement project has been removed from the Transportation Improvement Plan due to public and environmental concerns. Ted Wood, WFLHD, commented, “We appreciate the time and effort the community members gave to attend meetings and send in comments. Those comments, along with preliminary results of environmental studies, and a recent federal court decision prohibiting “take” of the Grizzly bear in the Cabinet Yaak Ecosystem, were instrumental in this decision.”

Two open houses will be held this month to provide opportunity for the public to visit with the project team regarding this decision, and to provide comment. Preliminary information gathered from the resource studies will also be available for review. The open houses will be held on Wednesday, October 19<sup>th</sup> 5:00 – 7:00 pm at the Thompson Falls Senior Center, Thompson Falls, and on Thursday, October 20<sup>th</sup>, 5:00 – 7:00 pm in the First National Bank Community Room 504 Mineral Ave., Libby.

The Thompson River Road Project was originally proposed by the Lolo National Forest, Sanders County, and Flathead County in 1999. The Montana Tri-Agency, comprised of representatives from WFLHD, Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), and the US Forest Service (USFS), added the project onto the Forest Highway Program in 2000. WFLHD was designated as the lead agency.

The project team, consisting of federal state, and local representatives, deliberated the options in depth prior to agreeing with the decision to stop project activities related to road improvements. The Tri-Agency supported the WFLHD decision, and agreed that this is not the time to pursue the project. Pending the resolution of issues, which factored into the decision to stop the project, the Thompson River Road improvements could once again be reconsidered in the future.

Thompson River Road, also designated as Montana Forest Development Road 56 and Forest Highway Route 56, is a Forest Service road that provides access to the west half of the Lolo National Forest. The proposed project was intended to provide the following:

- improved public access to the Lolo National Forest and other public lands in the Thompson River Corridor that is safe and convenient;
- Improved mobility for area residents, the traveling public, emergency vehicles, mail delivery, and school bus service;
- Reduced road maintenance; and
- Improved river conditions by eliminating road surface sediment load, and decommissioning unnecessary segments of the dual road system.

Potential benefits identified through public comments and preliminary studies included potential for improving fish and wildlife habitat within the drainage. A goal of the project was to reduce the dual road network to reduce river sediments, which would be beneficial to recovering bull trout. An additional goal was to replace the high-speed logging road alignment with a lower speed curvilinear alignment to reduce mortality of carnivores and other species resulting from vehicle collisions.

During the initial scoping process a number of social, environmental and political issues were identified. These issues included managing access to properties with the elimination of one road, and social and economic impacts on the surrounding community. The Grizzly take issue arose during the environmental review and consultation process. Together, these issues were considered more significant than the potential benefits, and the decision was made to stop the project.

The WFLHD administers the Federal Lands Highway Program in cooperation with other Federal land managing agencies. These programs provide access to and within national forests, national parks, Indian reservations, and other public lands by preparing plans, letting contracts, supervising construction facilities, and conducting bridge inspections and surveys.